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# An Indonesian Perspective On East Timor

Abdurrahman Wahid visited Melbourne in March and was interviewed by Mark Raper seeking his views on East Timor. Wahid was born in Jombang in 1940, educated in a *pesantren* (Islamic live-in educational institution) and then in Cairo and Bagdad. He is the Director of Pesantren Ciganjur near Jakarta, first secretary of the Executive Board of Nahdatul Ulama and a columnist of *Kompas* and *Tempo*. He has emerged in recent years as a leading Muslim intellectual concerned with development issues and is courageously critical of the Indonesian government on many points.

**Pak Wahid, as an Indonesian, how do you look at the issue of East Timor?**

Generally in regard to East Timor, I feel we should now try to find solutions to problems rather than just concentrating on what the problems are. Firstly it is very important that our accounts of East Timor be accurate. Recently I received a publication from India which said that the war in East Timor is still continuing. Now we know that the issue has been resolved militarily yet some groups still talk about resistance as if to imply that this is still in question. The army now has control. There have indeed been great sacrifices and losses by the people there and there is resentment by East Timorese of the Indonesian army, but it is not useful to speak as if it is not now resolved. The second problem is, how to accommodate those who don't agree with Indonesia, and this is our problem. It's about this problem that we must really work towards finding solutions. And this is not your problem, it is ours. The task is social integration in East Timor, we have to try. With the military power there some of the people have fled, some stay. Some have given into whatever resettlement program will now be made. Well, how will the Indonesians accommodate to their need, their spirit and their identity? While the fact is that the Indonesian army is there and it is declared an Indonesian province, East Timor has problems that are at least not less than those of the immediate surrounding islands and regions.

**So much has happened over the last five years and a reversal of this you say, certainly any immediate reversal, is highly improbable. Yet people like you have been able to take a critical stand on a number of issues within Indonesia. What are the ways in which you are able, within Indonesia, to speak to an issue like this one?**

That's impossible now because the articles I write on Timor are returned to me by all of the mass media, even 'Tempo', and believe me, I wrote hundreds of articles just appealing that we should hear the other case, the other side. Secondly, I think that to criticise the government in this context is useless. The important thing is to propose more constructive actions. So that is why that kind of unobjective use of the media, as in the report from India, is detrimental to us, it just does not help. At the same time as that Indian report came, the Intelligence approached me with a summary of their report. Since they knew I was critical, they presumed I agreed with that line, they had written it down summarised on a piece of paper and showed it to me. They said, 'Do you still agree with this position, yes or no?' You see they do not understand criticism, they do not understand that I tried to find a middle way, not just to criticise.

Now the approach that I would like to follow is a cultural one. How can we promote the cultural identity of the East Timorese person? That is important and it is political. It should be done through the development of the East Timorese language and through the traditions of the people so that they can still maintain something East Timorese and not be engulfed by the Indonesianisation. Then in the future there would still be the possibility of them to decide for themselves what they want because now, as things are, decision-making is not in their hands, but we must look to the future.

You see in Australia you have Greek people living in Melbourne and they are still Greek. That is the meaning of integration. In Indonesia therse people can still be, in culture and language, East Timorese, though their nationality can be Indonesian.

**The role of the schools then is very important?**

Yes it must be an educational program according to East Timorese needs, not according to Indonesian needs. I am afraid that the bringing of television programs to Timor now and the opening up of a television station is to go in the opposite direction. I fear for this program of nationalising East Timor, so we should run a program of defending, of fostering and of counter-balancing.

**Is there an attempt to spread Islam in East Timor? I heard that there was a fear of that.**

Well I don't think so. There is one fundamentalist group that may have about 10 to 12 students but it is something that they are doing, not only in East Timor but everywhere, they have a missionary attitude. The resurgence of Islamic activity though is more in Kupang in West Timor. They had a conference on Islamic education there last year.

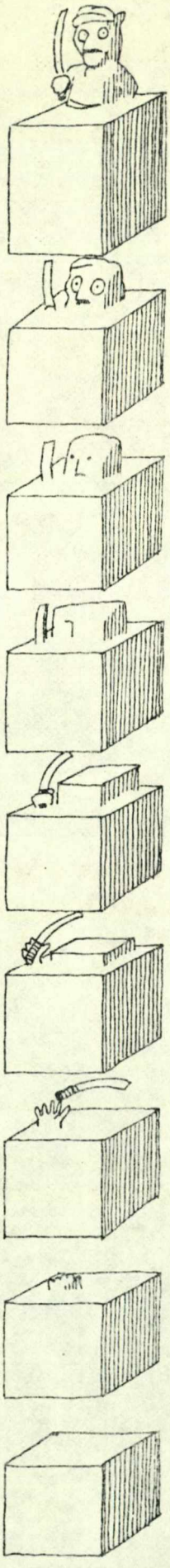
**While we may acknowledge that East Timor is now claimed to be a province of Indonesia and that a greater responsibility therefore lies on Indonesian people to see that this integration is not done in a way that damages the culture of the people or their right of choice, do you have any advice for us in Australia? Is there a role that we can play?**

Yes I think there are important things that you can do. You can aid the East Timorese to set up their own programs because Jakarta will not provide that. From Jakarta they will come with books in Indonesian language, the national language, written by non-Timorese, they will not account enough for Timorese culture, but you can assist them. You can assist by publishing books for them and help open up schools there and promote cultural activities as well. This is the main thing to be done.

**But we have no access at all.**

You can work through national organisations there. Of course the army will be suspicious at first but they must allow you to do that, otherwise it will be cultural genocide. I am confident in this opinion. It does not apply to East Timor only but it applies to Aceh, it applies also to the people of West Irian and what's important in those places is that there are Muslims, but they are nonetheless cornered and they are being forced to submit, whereas in East Timor there is the Church and you can assist the Church to protect the culture of the people. If the Church feels it's dangerous to go alone I will be glad if they want to work together because this is a national concern, it is the concern of every Indonesian. My own society, a human rights society, would be glad to do something to assist in this. We have already tried to make some first steps by collecting information about East Timor.

This will be the coming of age for Indonesians: when we can solve problems like this one of the Timorese people in a satisfactory way. It applies also to those animistic people and alienated communities who are scattered around within the outer islands. The government tries to force them all to follow the path of modernisation, but within Indonesia we have the responsibility to look to their rights. O



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